SETTLERS AND ABORIGINES ON THE PASTORAL FRONTIER

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Stories of conflict between the Aborigines and the early squatters and their servants have been commonplace in Australian writing since the middle of the nineteenth century. Yet many problems confront the historian wishing to reassess this aspect of our past. Perhaps the most difficult is the task of trying to look at early race relations from the other side of the frontier, to see the encroaching tide of settlement as far as possible through the eyes of the Aborigines themselves. Clearly no easy endeavour! The historian - perhaps rather the ethno-historian - has to piece together innumerable fragments of information provided by European informants while rejecting much that can be assumed to be inaccurate, or hearsay or excessively biased. Fortunately a small number of explorers, officials or squatters were remarkably intelligent and perceptive observers of Aboriginal life despite the lack of sophisticated anthropological knowledge. Information gathered has to be weighed and tested against modern studies of traditional life and acculturation in Central and Northern Australia. What eventually emerges can hopefully be built up into a meaningful mosaic of the Aboriginal response to settlement.

We can assume that most Aboriginal groups had at least some prior knowledge of Europeans before the first settlers arrived. European commodities - pieces of iron, horseshoes, tins, wire, glass and even tomahawks - had passed along Aboriginal trade routes to tribes far behind the frontier perhaps as much as ten or twenty years before the first white men appeared. But what of information about the strange and powerful newcomers? Did that too pass along the routes of trade and ceremonial exchange? We know that myths and dances criss-crossed the continent in a remarkably short time being passed on from tribe to tribe. In similar fashion scattered news of the settlers may have gone ahead of the moving frontier. This seems especially true of information about the terrifying power of European firearms. Various bits of evidence support this. Settlers often found that Aborigines with no known previous contact were extremely frightened of guns even without their being fired. Similar information

comes from the Aboriginal side of the frontier. Dick Roughsey related how on Mornington Island his father heard stories before contact about "how these white people could kill a man with thunder that sent down invisible spears to tear a hole in his body and spill his blood in the sand".[1] Linguistic information is also significant. The same word is used for gun in Aboriginal languages in many parts of Australia. Clearly it passed from tribe to tribe over great distances. Because an aboriginal word was used rather than the corruption of a European one it seems probable that the diffusion took place before the arrival of the earliest settlers.

The European's reputation for violence may also have preceded the pioneer. The Aborigines living around Mount Elliot among whom James Morrell lived for many years certainly heard of shooting and death before they saw the earliest pioneers. Similar information was provided by Bracefield, another white man who lived with the Aborigines before settlement caught up with him. He was a convict who, escaping from the Moreton Bay penal settlement, lived with the tribes who inhabited the mountains between the Brisbane Valley and Wide Bay. During his sojourn in the mountains the early squatters took their flocks into the Brisbane Valley north of the settlements at Moreton Bay and Ipswich. Conflict between Aborigines and shepherds erupted and on Kilcoy station a large group of blacks were poisoned through eating damper laced with arsenic. Bracefield subsequently reported that a large gathering of tribes met in the Bunya Mountains where news of the poisoning created great anger and desire for revenge. How common such reactions were it is hard to say. Gatherings as large as those which periodically took place in the Bunya Mountains were uncommon yet such was the devastating impact of pastoral settlement that it seems probable that news of conflict passed back from the frontier to tribes who had yet to see their first white man.

The Europeans evoked both great fear and intense curiosity among the Aborigines. Consequently a typical response was to keep out of the way of the newcomers but at the same time to secretly watch them and observe their behaviour. Europeans sometimes sensed this surveillance and felt that unseen eyes were constantly on them. Yet initial contact was often

peaceful with exchange of gifts and greetings. But good relations did not last except in a few quite atypical districts. The introduction of large numbers of sheep and cattle forced Aborigines and settlers into direct competition for land and water.

The Aborigines lived in delicate balance with their environment. The population was stabilized at the minimum level that could be supported in a poor season. Inevitably the sudden introduction of herds of cattle or flocks of sheep had a dramatic impact on the environment. Scarce water disappeared overnight and waterholes were polluted. Grasses and roots were eaten or trampled while indigenous animals retreated before the invasion. European attitudes exacerbated an already serious situation. Settlers in Queensland were imbued with the need to "keep the blacks out" at least during the early years of settlement thereby preventing free use of tribal territory and restricting access to water. Cattlemen were convinced that their herds would never settle on a new run if blacks were about. The saying 'cattle and blacks don't mix' was an axiom which boded ill for the Aborigines. In drier regions of the west, or during dry seasons almost anywhere, the competition for water was intense. We have interesting evidence of this from some of the first settlers to venture into the dry regions in the far west of Queensland who were forced to walk their sheep for long distances between water. On particularly dry stretches the animals became desperate with thirst and rushed out of control if they smelled water. Given the scarcity of drinkable surface water it would often happen that local Aborigines would already be camped around the water hole or creek bed. The mad onrush of the sheep would scatter the camp and drive the terrified Aborigines away from their camping ground. Thus water had became the basic source of conflict in the first hour of direct contact.

Use of grassland was another cause of confrontation. In many parts of Australia the Aborigines deliberately and systematically fired the grass every year in order to clear undergrowth and stimulate the growth of new grass. Some of the best known open downs in Australia were likely the conscious creation of the Aborigines. But the early squatters were quite unaware of this. When the blacks began burning the grass as they

had doubtless done for innumerable generations the settlers assumed it was a hostile act directed at them or else mere wanton destruction. The first serious conflict on the Darling Downs resulted from exactly this sort of misunderstanding.

Thus without hostile intent the squatters began to seriously impinge on Aboriginal life - restricting their access to water, depleting available flora and fauna and frequently confining groups to the least desirable portions of their territories. The fate of the Balonne River Aborigines was observed by the missionary William Ridley who wrote:

> On this river the effect upon the aborigines of the occupation by Europeans of the country was forcibly presented. Before the occupation of this district by colonists, the aborigines could never have been at a loss for the necessaries of life. Except in the lowest part of the river, there is water in the driest seasons; along the banks game abounded; waterfowl, emus, parrot tribes, kangaroos, and other animals might always, or almost always, be found. And if, at any time, these failed to supply food for the human tribe, the fish furnished a sure resource. But when the country was taken up, and herds of cattle introduced, not only did the cattle drive away the kangaroos, but those who had charge of the cattle found it necessary to keep the aborigines away from the river, as their appearance frightened the cattle in all directions. In fact, it is said that while troops of aborigines roam about the runs, and especially if they go to the cattle camps and watering places, it is impossible to keep a herd together.
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> After some fatal conflicts, in which some colonists and many aborigines have been slain, the blacks have been awed into submission to the orders which forbid their access to the river. And what is the consequence? Black fellows coming in from the west report that last summer very large numbers, afraid to visit the river, were crowded round a few scanty water-holes, within a day's walk of which it was impossible to get sufficient food; that during the hottest weather the great red ants in that dry locality were so formidable that neither men nor even opossums could rest night or day except for an hour or so at noon; that owing to these combined hardships many died. This is only black fellows' report; but when we know that people have been cut off from four-fifths of their usual supply of food, and reduced to a scanty supply of water, is it an incredible report that sickness and death have fallen upon them?[2]

Through the eyes of a contemporary then we see the ways in which conflict over land and water affected one group of Aborigines in Southern Queensland.

The sudden inrush of white men and their animals posed the Aborigines a terrible dilemma - either attempt to reach an accommodation with the

newcomers and exchange labour and sexual favours for food, or attack the flocks and herds in order to remain independent and perhaps to drive the newcomers away. The first option, that of 'coming in' to European settlement was frequently not available in the early period of contact because of the widespread determination of the pioneers to "keep the blacks out". Often the choice must have been between slow starvation in the bush, at least for the young and the elderly, or direct conflict with the Europeans.

Resulting Aboriginal attacks on sheep and cattle were more serious than has usually been appreciated. Often hundreds and even thousands of sheep were driven off unfenced runs and taken off into nearby mountain or forest. Although flocks were often recovered by enraged squatters their losses were considerable and at times on such a scale as to precipitate bankruptcy. Cattle were less vulnerable but were nonetheless speared in large numbers. As they came to depend on sheep and cattle to replace depleted indigenous food supplies the Aborigines adapted existing hunting techniques, developed new ones and quickly learnt how to handle the exotic European animals. Evidence of this comes from many places. Settlers noted that the Aborigines were finding ways of using their dogs to help run down sheep and cattle, or cutting out groups of animals from larger flocks and herds and herding them across miles of often difficult country. In many places the settlers found that Aborigines had constructed enclosures out of logs and bushes to pen the animals in while waiting to kill them for food. This is a most interesting example of cultural adaption resulting from modification of existing hunting techniques and methods learnt from close observation of the Europeans. Reports of Aboriginal 'stockyards' came from all over Eastern Australia. Such widely scattered evidence raises an interesting problem. Did each tribal or even each sub-tribal group develop these techniques in isolation or were new methods communicated over long distances? This problem remains unsolved but we can be quite certain that Aboriginal attacks on sheep and cattle were a principal cause of frontier violence.

It is no longer tenable to talk of the Australian frontier as being uniquely peaceful as some historians have done in the past. Almost every district in Queensland experienced a period of racial conflict lasting

anything from a few months to as long as ten years. Frontier violence in Queensland continued to smoulder throughout most of the nineteenth century, beginning when the first squatters pushed up onto the Darling Downs and only dying away in the 1890's as attempts were made to settle marginal land in the far west and Cape York. With patient accounting it has been possible to arrive at a fair estimate of the number of Europeans killed by Aborigines on the pastoral frontier. In some districts where conflict was sharpest as many as 10% or even 20% of the initial workforce died violently by spear or club or boomerang. Overall perhaps 500 or 600 Europeans fell to Aborigines attack. The death toll on the other side of the frontier was very much higher although impossible to determine with any certainty. But European firepower and mobility gave the settlers and the Native Mounted Police an easy superiority despite the Aborigines' intimate knowledge of the terrain. When conflict was at its height the Aborigines lived a life of constant insecurity; of precipitate flight and violent death. One can only guess at the ultimate death toll but it may have amounted to anything between five and fifteen thousand.

The precise course of white-aboriginal relations was often determined by the policies of particular groups of settlers, by how long and ruthlessly they enforced a policy of 'keeping the blacks out' and how skilfully they handled the many problems arising when eventually local Aborigines were 'let in' to settlement or station. Both policies were fraught with uncertainty and danger but from our point of view the most interesting problems arose when 'letting in' brought the two races into close and constant contact.

Remember that on the pastoral frontier each small group of Europeans - squatter, shepherds and other employees - were usually living in the midst of a larger, if scattered, indigenous population. Even without violence or ecological disruption the newcomer presented problems to the Aborigines. In tribal society all behaviour was delineated by complex codes of obligation based on kinship networks. Strangers could only be accommodated within this system by assimilation and Europeans who lived in constant contact with traditional societies frequently discovered that they had been incorporated within an intricate net of

kinship. This could happen in a number of ways. Someone might claim the white stranger as a lost relative returned from the dead or he would perhaps be awarded the status of brother to the first person who saw him. Once the newcomer's status was determined each person in the tribe or clan would know how to behave towards him and what behaviour to expect in return.

The problems inherent in such an attempted assimilation were manifold; opportunities for misunderstanding abounded. Mutual sharing was a marked characteristic of Aboriginal life and generosity highly valued. Even the poorest European settler had an overflowing abundance of material possessions when compared with neighbouring tribesmen. Two concepts of behaviour and of property met head on. Each race saw the other as behaving in morally unacceptable ways. To the black the European was manifestly selfish; the white was driven to anger by what appeared to be constantly provocative thieving.

Sexual relations were another source of misunderstanding and tension. As with material possessions two conceptual worlds collided. Neither group understood the other's sexual mores. Early settlers often found that women were offered to them; they in turn were frequently only too willing to accept the proferred sexual favours. But such behaviour appeared to the Europeans to indicate a complete absence of sexual morality. This assessment was of course far from the mark. The ceremonial offer of wives to visiting strangers as a gesture of friendship and hospitality was practiced in varying ways in many parts of the world. It indicated a different morality not the absence of it. If sexual favours were not offered the settlers frequently took them violently, running women down, tying them up and keeping them against their will. Europeans quickly learnt that sexual contact, regardless of how initiated, frequently led to deteriorating race relations and overt violence. They rarely understood the full ramifications of sexual relations with tribal women, that copulation involved them in a complex of social obligations which had to be met on pain of punishment. Having had intercourse with one woman their future sexual relations were strictly determined by traditional behaviour patterns. If another woman was taken the white man would quite probably be committing incest as defined in tribal society. To the

Aborigine the European appeared to totally disregard normal canons of behaviour and openly break tribal law. All such 'criminal' acts carried traditional penalties. It seems probable that in many cases Europeans were punished although often the knowledge of the settler's power deterred potential revenge parties. Once again we see the two races totally failing to understand each other. The Aborigines were applying traditional penalties to law breakers, the settlers were appalled by what appeared to be motiveless and unexpected savagery.

Some of the dangers and complexities of frontier contact can be illustrated by reference to the fate of the Frazer and Wills families who died in Aboriginal attack at Hornet Bank in 1858 and Cullinlaringoe in 1861. At Hornet Bank the Frazers initially had good relations with the local Aborigines who had been 'let in' and who assisted in the work of establishing the station. Suddenly violence erupted. In a well planned attack most of the family were killed. To Europeans this was an example of senseless and motiveless savagery perpetrated for the sheer joy of killing. On the frontier Hornet Bank came to symbolize the dangers of ever trusting the blacks. But from the Aboriginal side things looked very different. By piecing together scattered pieces of information it is possible to partially recreate the course of events. The principal cause of conflict was the behaviour of European men towards Aboriginal women who were taken by force and raped. Opinions conflict as to whether the men were members of the Frazer family or their employees. Such behaviour merited dire punishment in tribal society. When no action of appeasement or retribution came from the Europeans the blacks took matters into their own hands and carried out the vengeance which traditional custom demanded. The whole Frazer affair then looks very different indeed when seen from the other side of the frontier. This is equally so with the case of the Wills at Cullinglaringoe in 1861.

When the Wills family arrived on the Nogoa, land was just being taken up. They wished to come to terms with the local Aborigines and 'let them in' from the start but unfortunately for them the tone of race relations had already been established. The earliest squatter, Gregson, was determined to ruthlessly enforce a policy of "keeping the blacks out".

The local clans tried repeatedly to establish friendly relations with him but were just as often driven away. The situation rapidly deteriorated. One of Gregson's shepherds lost a flock of sheep. They were found wandering aimlessly about by a group of Aborigines who in turn were discovered by the Native Mounted Polive who shot on sight killing an undisclosed number. The tribe sought revenge. As all white men appeared to speak the same language it was assumed they were related and therefore accountable for each others behaviour. So the unsuspecting Wills family died at the hands of a revenge party little understanding what had gone wrong. Once again the Europeans took the killing as evidence of irreconcilable savagery and in turn exacted their own massive and disproportionate revenge.

Yet conflict was only part of the story and eventually an accommodation was reached in all frontier districts. Both sides found violence costly. The Aborigines will to resist was frequently broken by dwindling food supplies, constant tension, violent death and general disruption of traditional life. The settlers too felt the anxieties of frontier life. But they suffered economically as well. While conflict continued their flocks and herds were depleted and labour was extremely expensive even when procurable. Despite its inherent dangers 'letting in' came to seem the lesser of two evils. So in small groups or in large the Aborigines began to take up semi-permanent residence in camps on the sheep and cattle stations exchanging labour and sex for food and relative security. By this time the first period of contact had ended. Race relations entered a new phase which has lasted in some places up to the present day.

REFERENCES

1. Roughsey, D., Moon and Rainbow, Sydney, 1971, p.13.
2. Report of W. Ridley printed as appendix to J.D. Lang, Queensland, London, 1861, p.439.